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Judith E. Smith

University of Massachusetts Boston, judith.smith@umb.edu

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Amelia: A Celebrity Icon for Our Times?

Judith E. Smith
American Studies
University of Massachusetts Boston

What is the cultural terrain staked out by Amelia, the recent Hollywood-distributed biopic about intrepid flyer Amelia Earhart? The quick shots that precede the opening credits direct attention to the particular themes that Producer Ted Waitt, director Mira Nair, and screenwriters Ron Bass and Anna Hamilton Phelan have emphasized in their 2009 feature about the flyer. Her airplane taking off into the dark gestures to the mystery of her last flight and disappearance without a trace. Her celebrity status is indicated by cheering crowds, radio interviews, and photographs, fusing seamlessly with her status as an object of heterosexual adoration once we find out that her publicity is orchestrated by her promoter/husband. There are intimations of Earhart's adventurous and dauntless spirit via a more hopeful take off into a dawn sky, expansive aerial views accompanied by soaring music, and a playful exchange between Earhart and her navigator crewman. There are reminders of the enormous risks of her flights, voiced by the concerned husband (this exchange appears twice in the film). Shots alternate between a serene and smiling Earhart at the controls and the vastness of the ocean, the ambiguity of the clouds. Bold and daring female pilot; glamorous celebrity; gloriously heterosexual romantic partner; having it all, losing it all, defying death's inevitability by disappearing into mystery.

The actors and crew responsible for this film bring distinguished acting and filmmaking careers to this project. Cast in the principal roles are two-time Oscar Best Actress Hilary Swank, playing Amelia Earhart; accomplished male romantic lead Richard Gere as George P. Putnam, her publisher and promoter turned devoted husband; and the dashing Ewan MacGregor, as Earhart's admiring lover, West Point aviation instructor and commercial airline pioneer Gene Vidal (the father of the writer Gore Vidal). The director, Mira Nair, made her name on very distinctive and widely admired films, including Salaam Bombay! (1988), Mississippi Masala (1992), and Monsoon Wedding (2002). The screenwriters Ron Bass and Anna Hamilton Phelan have produced acclaimed screenplays from original and adapted material, with Bass writing the award-winning original screenplays for Rain Man (1988), as well as the adaptations for The Joy Luck Club (1993) and Snow Falling on Cedars (1999) among many other films, and Anna Hamilton Phelan responsible for Mask (1985), Gorillas in the Mist The Story of Dian Fossey (1988) and Girl Interrupted (1999). No Hollywood hacks in this company.

Cultural fascination with Amelia Earhart has been extensive. Think for example, of Dorothy Arzner's 1933 film Christopher Strong, with the charismatic female aviatrix played by a young and beautiful Katherine Hepburn. This fascination shows no sign of abating -- Jane Mendelsohn's first novel, I Was Amelia Earhart, imagining a post-disappearance life for Earhart and Noonan, was a surprise best-seller in 1997. Earhart is the subject of countless biographies, and her name continue to circulate on school buildings, in record books, in punk rock diva Patti

Smith's poems, in pop, folk and country songs. Her likeness was appropriated by advertising campaigns for Gap khakis and Apple computers. The popular biographies optioned for 2009 screenplay, Mary Lovell's The Sound of Wings and Susan Butler's East to the Dawn, came out in 1989 and 1997, respectively, and have been reissued this year in connection with the film's release.

Both reviewers and audiences have responded to the film with a notable lack of enthusiasm. Reviewers have been fairly unanimous in describing the film narrative and acting as lifeless, visual images and dialogue unbearably clichéd. Audiences have been voting with their feet, producing minimal ticket sales lagging far behind its cost (only a little more than \$ 14 million after 10 weeks in release), in a year when general ticket sales to movies have been on the increase.¹ How could a film about such a beloved and intrinsically fascinating historical figure generate so little interest?

Beyond the kinds of answers that look to movie ticket buying demographics, film industry trends, and the general instability of Hollywood filmmaking in the midst of new and transformed media and digital environments, I want to speculate on another possibility particularly relevant to the concerns of historians and history teachers, the readers of this journal. Amelia failed to find much of an audience because no one connected with the production was interested in representing

¹ Reviews sampled at Metacrtics.com; box office figures from Internet Movie Data Base (IMDB.com), both accessed January 16, 2010. IMDB estimated the film budget at \$40 million; film journalist David Carr reported it as \$20 million in "Earhart's Mystique Takes Wing Again," New York Times, October 18, 2009.

anything about the past. History offered only a “look,” whatever artful stylistic elements could contribute novelty to costume and production design. Instead, those involved with this production appear to have been drawn to Earhart’s story because they imagined its themes to neatly mirror the present, Earhart’s subjectivity as the same as their own subjectivity. They found Earhart compelling because of how she seemed to present a contemporary female ideal: successfully competing on previously male terrain while remaining an object of male desire, her female-bodied “progress” in individual success and personal freedoms, like that claimed by female candidacies of Hilary Clinton and Sarah Palin, substituting for gender equality achieved at the level of broad social and institutional change. Imagining a personage from the past as a contemporary heroine promotes her significance as outside of history, as timeless.

The film’s producer, corporate entrepreneur Ted Waitt, praised Earhart as a role model because she engaged in “the extreme sport” of flying, because “the risks she faced took an incredible amount of guts.” Waitt has been described by media journalist David Carr as “something of an adventurer himself”, and one of the many amateur investigators committing time and money to trying to solve the mystery of Earhart’s death. Amelia was the first feature produced by Avalon Pictures, a subsidiary of Avalon Capital group, a private investment company run by Waitt, formerly co-founder of the computer company Gateway. The retired commercial pilot and navigator Elgen Long, avid Earhart memorabilia collector, co-author of a book about Earhart’s last flight, and employed as technical consultant on the film,

credits Earhart individually as “responsible for so many things we take for granted these days ...in aviation and in the rights of women.” Swank, who was instrumental in developing this project and is credited as executive producer, describes Earhart as expressing her own values: “I believe that you can live your life the way you want, find love, and experience your dreams. You can have it all...For a short time, Amelia had it all.” Director Nair’s comments have emphasized Earhart as the first modern celebrity, the uncanny physical and oral resemblance achieved by Swank’s performance, and also her own personal identification with Earhart—“the more I read about her, the more I thought she is like I was.”²

One result of abandoning the exploration of the past as “a foreign country,” as strange, with the potential for denaturalizing the present, is that a “timeless” life story mirroring contemporary ideals easily becomes merely conventional. After perhaps one quick pleasurable moment of recognizing a 1930s icon as “just like us”, the viewer realizes he/she has seen all this before: personal accomplishment resulting in and affirmed by popular celebrity; female public achievement as compatible with, resulting in, and perhaps even enhancing, heterosexual and romantic allure; eventual success as the triumph of individual aspirations and single-minded commitment.

²Waitt, Long and Nair quoted in David Carr, “Earhart’s Mystique Takes Wing Again;” Swank quoted in Cindy Pearlman, “No Mystery Surrounding ‘Amelia’ Star,” Chicago Sun Times, October 25, 2009. Long’s comments revealed the film’s narrow vision of gender essentialism when he was quoted as “thrilled that Mira Nair directed the film because she is something of a pioneer in a man’s field, and I think a lot of the insights into Amelia’s character came to her quite naturally.”

The film's focus on Earhart between 1928 and 1937 requires telescoping whatever was distinctive in her personal historical development. Its insistence on her life as exceptional requires effacing any mention of precedents or peers for the unconventional alternatives she explored. The economy of film storytelling always requires difficult choices, but I want to explore what the film Amelia left out. The film offers nothing about Earhart's class position, as the daughter of a lawyer-turned-railroad claims agent and of a mother whose own father was a former federal judge, the president of the local savings bank, and a leading citizen of Atchison, Kansas. Earhart's mother supported advanced education for her daughters, in an era when only 4% of women (and only 6% of men) completed four years of college. The film offers no glimpses of Earhart's childhood pursuits of out-door rough and tumble physical play, her self-described "special glee" in putting on a bloomer-type of gym clothes and going out to shock "all the nice little girls."

The film makes not a single gesture towards explaining the development of Earhart's gender, social and political consciousness. There are no hints of her experience as a nurse's aid volunteer in a Canadian military hospital during WWI that stimulated both her interest in flying and a life-long commitment to pacifism. There is no mention of the annotated scrapbook she kept in the 1920s on "women's accomplishments, "focusing on women social workers and reformers moving into government and public life, with attention to women who combined marriage and careers. The film does not show the various jobs Earhart took to pay for her expensive new hobby of flying, with initial lessons from a female pilot; or anything

to explain her stature among female pilots. There are no references to her work at a Boston settlement house in Boston or her membership in the National Women's Party, with its single-minded focus on women's equality, or her support for birth control. Without knowing the significance of Earhart's public endorsement of FDR and the New Deal, the scene of Earhart taking Eleanor Roosevelt out for a night flight over Washington, D.C., conveys only giddy adventure and flying's seductive appeal to an older and presumably more staid ER. Earhart's unconventional marital arrangement and experimentation with sexual freedom is represented as her individual invention, rather than as participating in alternative norms explored by many writers and artists, journalists and performers in the 1920s.³

In the film, Earhart's female accomplishments are explained in terms of her personal single-minded passion, from watching an airplane flying over Kansas fields to jumping at the chance to be the first woman passenger to fly across Atlantic in 1928 to her record setting solo flights in 1932 and 1935. There are brief invocations of all-female settings: Earhart answers questions for women's audiences, she competes in but does not win a women's air derby; she gives a magnanimous speech claiming that a victory for any woman flyer is a victory for her. Using the device of faux newsreels, the film announces, but does not explain, the formation of the 99s, an organization for women pilots. But throughout, the film

³ Susan Ware's Still Missing: Amelia Earhart and the Search for Modern Feminism (NY: Norton, 1993) calls attention to these aspects of Earhart's life. See also Amelia Earhart: Image and Icon ed. Kristin Lubben and Erin Barnett (NY: International Center for Photography, 2007) and Judith Thurman, "Missing Woman: Amelia Earhart's Flight," New Yorker, September 14, 2009.

points to men as her key influences. The only mention of her family of origin refers to her father's shaping psychological legacy: wanderlust and the gift of a globe, the after-effects of his being a drunk and letting her down, which the film turns into a perceived confidence in managing male crew members who drink. And Earhart's relationship with Putnam becomes the film's central focus.

This Amelia foregrounds romance, although there is controversy among Earhart biographers about how to understand the partnership with Putnam and its commercial/entrepreneurial apparatus. The film portrays his love as genuine and expansively embracing her romance with flight, and in doing so, displaces commerce as driving force in maintaining her celebrity.⁴ An initial hint that Putnam's original interest in Earhart was financial is raised only to be repeatedly undermined with two-shots predicting their romantic future, showing Putnam easily slipping from managing her appearance through fashion advice to initiating their first kiss. The film imagines Earhart as a willing heterosexual partner, amenable to marriage if that does not include conventional fidelity, domesticity or motherhood, as spelled out via Earhart's own words in a prenuptial letter of

⁴ The biographies optioned as the basis for the screenplay by Mary Lovell viewed the central relationship between Putnam and Earhart in very positive terms. In the Sound of Wings, Mary Lovell wrote that "There was love between George and Amelia" as well as what the reviewer called a "mutually satisfying business partnership": David Kennedy, "She Was Betrayed by Fame," New York Times, November 26, 1989. Susan Butler's hagiographic East to the Dawn, published to mark Earhart's 100th birthday and the 60th anniversary of her disappearance, provides evidence for Earhart's affair with Vidal, and more generally, exalts "its subject for doing everything better than anybody else;" Emily Wortis Leider, "Into Thin Air," New York Times, November 2, 1997.

agreement she wrote before the wedding ceremony, and confirmed via the affair with Vidal.

The possibility that commerce and romance are not perfectly compatible does briefly surface only to be decisively contained by the narrative. In one scene Earhart complains about the grueling demands of the promotional apparatus Putnam has arranged: “Here I am jumping through hoops just like the little white horse in the circus.”⁵ This comment could direct our attention to the hard work of creating and maintaining popular celebrity. But instead, Putnam emphasizes to Amelia and the audience that there really is no conflict between love and commerce, love and flying and that he consistently has Earhart’s best interests at heart. He offers his proposal of marriage as a chance to let him “try to give you whatever you want,” as well promising repeatedly that all his promotional efforts are devoted only to financing Earhart’s flying. The scenes posing Earhart with the commercial products she endorses (luggage, a informal clothing line, Eastman Kodak cameras, waffle irons) get full advertising glamour black and white photography, shot from the top down, Busby Berkeley style. When she does take advantage of her prenuptial agreement to have an affair with Vidal, and Vidal briefly criticizes something she proposes as “too commercial,” Earhart’s answer voices Putnam’s position: “whatever I do, I do so I can fly.” (She then resigns from a joint aviation venture with Vidal and announces that she is going “home” to George). Putnam’s true love and Earhart’s full assimilation of the commercial apparatus is finally verified in their

⁵ According to Ware, Earhart made this comment about a lecturing trip in 1931, the same year as her marriage to Putnam Ware, *Still Missing*, p. 96

goodbye preceding what will be the last flight, where he raises the possibility of cancelling the 1937 globe circling flight, despite huge financial losses, and she answers him that to exit now would be as “stupid as cash withdrawing from the banks.” She then reasserts her transcendent goal as synonymous with her personal integrity, because the flight is “not something to show the world, [but] something to show me.”

The film performs a similar sleight of hand in questioning and then affirming Earhart’s heterosexual bona fides. The dialogue is coded to reframe Earhart’s boyish dress and camaraderie with male crew and associates under the rubric of a masculine identification that gives way to mature heterosexuality. In a scene between Vidal and Earhart at a nightclub, Earhart glamorously dressed in evening wear, black torch singer and musicians in the background suggesting sexual license, she admires a woman’s legs. Vidal queries her: “I thought you just wanted to be one of the boys.” Her answer, “that might have been true at one time, but not any more,” immediately precedes the breathless kiss in an elevator which signals the start of an affair.

The ending of the film offers a message of timeless inspiration rather than historical ambiguity and uncertainty. Amelia presents Earhart’s disappearance as caused by unsurprising difficulties: an improbable plan for refueling on a tiny barely visible Howland Island, faulty communication, and running out of gas. Although some at the time questioned the plans for this flight as foolhardy, the film’s

focus here is on Earhart's quest, her resolute courage in the face of death, contrasting her composure with the more ordinary (and "feminine") anxious praying response of her crew member Fred Noonan. Nair commented that their strategy was to "dramatize the last twenty minutes of her life with the real transmissions from the flight." She imaged Earhart's risk-taking, and her final moments as representing the human condition: she hopes that "people will see themselves in her decisions to set aside her fears and live her life to the fullest". But by this point in the film, Earhart's actual words from the cockpit cannot break through the kinds of visual and verbal cliches the filmmakers have substituted for the flyer's distinctive voice and moment.⁶ The feature film Amelia leaves the fascinating historical Earhart "still missing."

⁶ Nair's quoted in Pearlman, "No Mystery Surrounding 'Amelia' 's Star," and Carr, "Earhart's Mystique Takes Wing Again." Reviewers were consistently critical of the script and dialogue, including Earhart's in-flight voice-over narration. One partial explanation might be that a lot of what Earhart wrote about her flights was not particularly original in expression, produced under the pressure of commercial deadlines and sometimes borrowing the language of others, as when she quotes Carl Sandburg's 1916 Chicago Poems: "The fog comes on little cat feet." Although there is not space in this review to analyze it in detail, I also want to call attention to the unchallenged imperial gaze of the ethnographic travelogue of non-white peoples and exotic animals that Earhart exclaims over ("look how free they are") and then films to send home to Putnam. The New Yorker's David Denby categorizes the overall visual style as "pretty, even luscious, in a familiar National Geographic sort of way:" November 2, 2009, p. 118.